

WHO WAS REBEKAH?

I. Methodology---a perspectival approach.

- A. Author.
- B. Interpreter.

II. Some traditional interpretations of Rebekah.

- A. Midrash Rabbah.
- B. Protestant Christian scholars.
- C. Catholic Christian scholars.

III. Rebekah as saint.

- A. " Drink, my Lord." Gen. 24:18.
- B. " I will draw water for your camels, too, until they have had enough." Gen.24: 19.
- C. " We have plenty of straw and fodder, and room to lodge." Gen. 24:25.
- D. "The children struggled with one another inside her, and she said: " If this is the way of it, why go on living?" Gen. 25:22
- E. " Now my son, listen to me and do as I tell you." Gen. 27: 5-6.
- F. " On me be the curse, my son!" Gen 27: 13.
- G. " If Jacob marries...one of the women of the country, what meaning is there left in life for me?" Gen. 27:46.

Presentation by
Sr. Christine Hope
June 1983

Who Was Rebekah?

Introduction: written for a symposium of the AAR, different views.

I. Methodology--- a perspectival approach

A. Author: hermeneutics....study of language (interpretation)
who wrote the text
for what purpose
suggestion that the stories of Abraham, Issac,
and Jacob were linked later for Israeli history
problem; Rebekah is a mediating figure

B. Reader: what looking for when studying the text
historical document
sociological
religious
existential (seeking to open the human meaning
of the text)

based on Kierkegaard's example of
the interpretation of Abraham's act
of sacrifice of Issac in Fear and Trembling

women's studies seeking to uncover the lost roots
of women's history

Rebekah is the first woman after
Eve to be revealed existentially...
in detail.

All these different approaches may bring some of
the truth....this is the perspectival approach.
(vs. the academic trend to claim that one approach
is the truth)

II. Some traditional interpretations of Rebekah.

(Before begin a new approach seek to discover what
has already been claimed) compare Jewish,
Protestant, and Catholic

A. Midrash Rabbah

1. matriarch
2. lily among thorns
3. blameless
4. led by an angel of God

} positive but not developed

B. Protestant : developed, ^{and} ~~an~~ essentially negative

1. A.S. Herbert

" Jacob's fraudulent acquisition of the blessing...
is one of the most unpleasant stories of the book
of Genesis....Again, the conduct of Rebekah
was such as to arouse the most vigorous
condemnation in ancient Israel. For not only
did she instigate this deception, she was, by

her conduct, acting against her husband and so destroying the unity of the family." (163)

2. S.R. Driver

" The narrative tells how, instigated by his ambitious and designing mother, Jacob deceives his aged father, and wrests from his brother his father's blessing. That the action of Rebekah and Jacob was utterly discreditable and indefensible, is of course, obvious. " 164

3. Walter Bowie

" Rebekah's love for Jacob was so fiercely jealous that it broke loose from any larger loyalty. As between her twin sons, she wanted Jacob to have the best of everything, no matter how he got it; and to that end she would not scruple at trickery and unfairness both towards her husband and her son, Esau. There was something of the tigress in Rebekah, instinctively protecting the cub that by physical comparison was inferior...The story is a study of the way in which an emotion essentially beautiful may become perverted." 164

He compared her to Jezebel and Lady Macbeth.

4. Elizabeth Cady Stanton The Women's Bible

She decries " the supreme wickedness of Rebekah in deceiving Issac, defrauding Esau, and undermining the moral sense of the son she loved"

She states further: " It is a pitiful tale of greed and deception. Alas! Where can a child look for lessons in truth, honor, and generosity, when the mother they naturally trust, sets at defiance every principle of justice and mercy to secure some wordly advantage." 165

C. Catholic: ^{Some} Positive but not developed

1. St. Augustine (City of God)

The act was not a lie, ~~but~~ a mystery.

2. St. Thomas (Summa Theologiae)

Says that Jacob spoke in a mystical way when he said he was Esau, Issac's first born

3. St. John Crysostom (53rd homily on Genesis) - ^{open poss. for} ~~developed~~

"Behold the great love of the mother, or rather the

management of God. For it was he himself who gave to her this stratagem, and took care that all things should turn out well... What, therefore, of Rebekah... For! she acted not only according to her own intention, but she serves the divine oracle and sought with all eagerness to free the boy from fears and strengthen his soul that he might accomplish the stratagem; nor did she promise him that he could mislead the father and hide it, But what of this: "Upon me be your curse, my son, only obey my word, and go get them for me." 166

III. Rebekah as saint:

- A. " Drink, my lord." Gen 24:18
 1. Period of preparation for sanctity
 - a. immediate response to the servants request for a little water
- B. " I will draw water for your camels, too, until they have had enough." Gen 24: 19
 2. Generosity of response
 2. Not until she is tired, but until the animals have been satisfied.
 3. the sign the servant had prayed for
- C. " I am the daughter of Betheul, the son whom Milcah bore to Nahor...We have plenty of straw and fodder, and room to lodge."
 1. announces herself.
 - a. Driver: " quickly , though unconsciously"
 - b. AS Herbert " The truth of the story lies in the fact that God guides even when men are quite unaware of his guidance."
 - c. Question: why, if God revealed the sign to the servant who was looking for a husband for Issac shouldn't he have also revealed it to Rebekah?
 2. aware of call.
- D. "The children struggled with one another inside her, and she said: " If this is the way of it, why do on living?"
 1. the capacity to endure long term suffering (purification
 2. She felt the temptation to suicide...but overcame it and went to consult Yahwah where she was told: the purpose ~~of it~~ and meaning of the suffering. " You have two nations in your womb, your issue will be two rival peoples. One nation will have the mastery of the other, and the elder shall serve the younger."
- E. "Now my son, listen to me and do as I tell you." "only obey my word" *and get them for me*
 1. Taking hold of her responsibility to fulfill her destiny — and calling Jacob to obedience.
 2. Interesting that God did not tell Jacob directly (use one saint to help another)

3. Important to note that Rebekah's vocation did not simply end with giving birth to ~~Esau~~ Esau and Jacob.

~~What were~~

4. Her vocation went far beyond the simply biological mothering, she was called to be mother in the fullest sense.

F. " On me be the curse, my son".

1. Rebekah offered herself as a sacrificial victim for her son and for the divine needs for continuity of sacramental leadership of the Jewish people.
2. The first example of such a ' Christian act' in the Bible
3. What were her alternatives?

- a. Rebekah could have followed Sarah's example and felt her vocation to end at the biological birth ^{and nurturing} of her children.
- b. She could have recognized Jacob as the chosen one, but believed that she had no part in making this ^{happen} possible herself.
- c. She could have decided to speak directly with Issac who appeared to be blinded by the familial lines of inheritance
- d. She could have run away with Jacob to her brother Laban ...but this would have forfeited the patriarchal blessing..and abandoned Issac in his old age.
- e. So she chose instead deceit.
 1. Judith chose the same method to kill Holofernis
 2. Kierkegaard refers to this as the suspension of the ethical for a higher cause (teleological)

4. Fear and trembling

- a. As cutting across the patriarchal lines and the bond between husband and wife

5. The sacrifice of self to strengthen Jacob in his weakness.

- a. Jacob was afraid and asked: What if my father curses me instead of blesses me ...when I put on the sheep skin to pretend that I am Esau.
- b. Rebekah answers simply " On me be the curse, my son".
- c. This lifting of the weight of the curse freed Jacob to carry out his part of the event..to risk.

G. If Jacob marries...one of the women of the country what meaning is there left in life for me?

1. bringing the life's work to completion...the continuity of the sacred line.
2. Issac finally recognized her (affirmation) and Jacob ' left in obedience to his father and mother" and went to find Rachael.